

# The European urban landscape

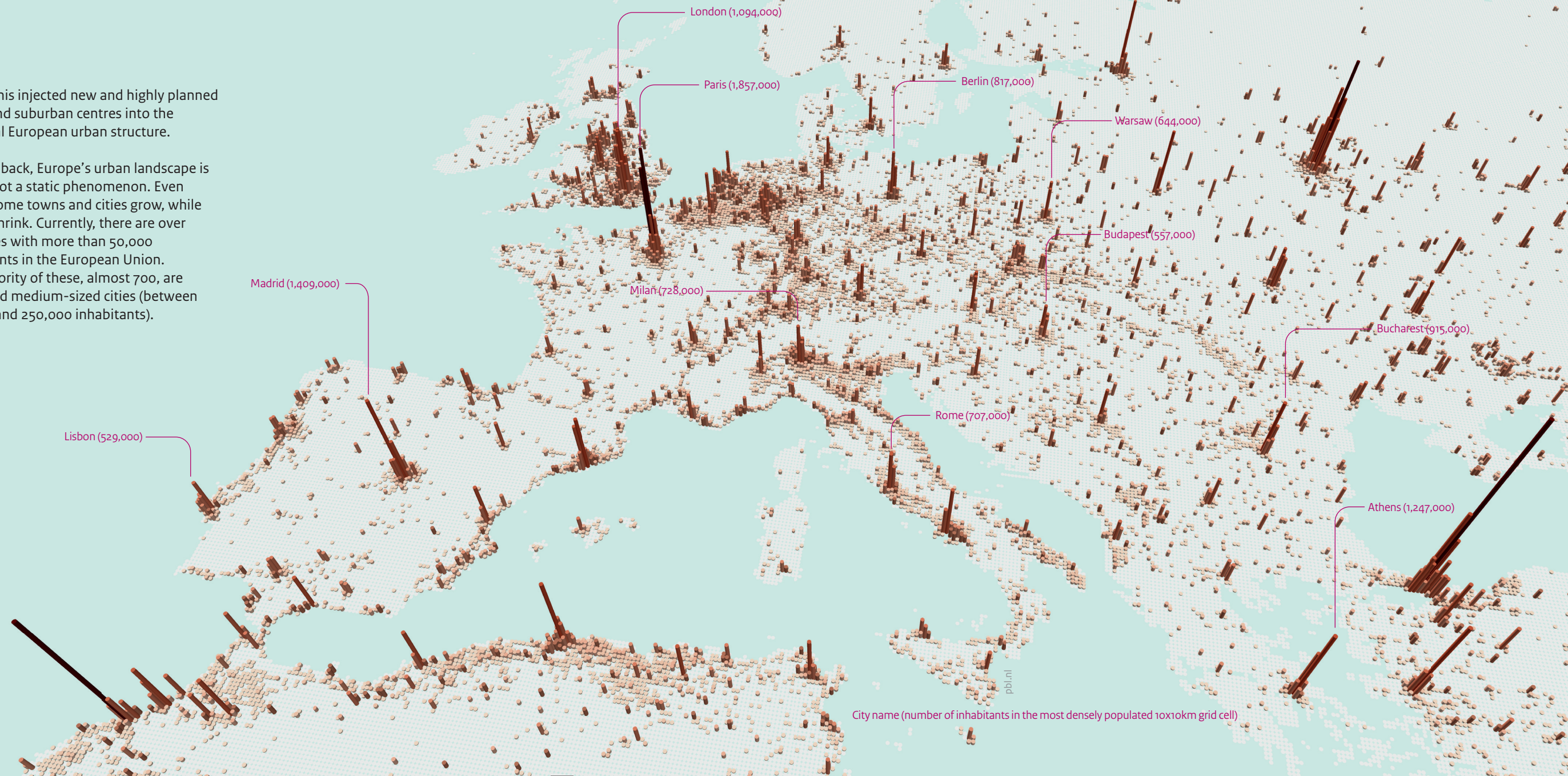
Population density 2014  
 On a grid of 10x10 kilometres  
 Source: LandScan, adaptation by PBL

The urban landscape of Europe is characterised by a large diversity of small, medium-sized and large cities. Compared to other parts of the world, many urban regions in Europe have a polycentric structure where multiple towns and cities are in close proximity to one another. In other cases, a single large city – typically a nation’s capital – dominates its surrounding region, resulting in a more monocentric pattern. In a few regions, a linear urbanisation pattern can be discerned, such as in areas bordering the Mediterranean Sea and Italy’s Adriatic coast.

Europe’s urban structure is the result of many underlying factors. Some settlements date back to the Roman Empire, where they functioned as administrative centres. Other towns and cities developed during the Middle Ages as regional marketplaces at strategic locations along trade routes, often close to a river or harbour. As a result of political, demographic and economic developments, towns and cities flourished (and therefore expanded) in some periods, whereas other periods were characterised by decline (Benevolo, 1995; Rutte and Abrahamse, 2016). Over the course of the 20th century, cities spilled over into their surrounding regions. Several countries built so-called new towns. Milton Keynes in the United Kingdom, Almere in the Netherlands and Nowa Huta in Poland are examples of

these. This injected new and highly planned urban and suburban centres into the historical European urban structure.

Looking back, Europe’s urban landscape is clearly not a static phenomenon. Even today, some towns and cities grow, while others shrink. Currently, there are over 800 cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants in the European Union. The majority of these, almost 700, are small and medium-sized cities (between 50,000 and 250,000 inhabitants).



City name (number of inhabitants in the most densely populated 10x10km grid cell)